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Noem tightens her grip on DHS

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Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem has upended DHS staffing in her first year, pairing high-level leadership ousters with a growing staff exodus.

Why it matters: Multiple reports describe a culture of fear inside DHS as Noem and her top adviser Corey Lewandowski have fired, reassigned and demoted people throughout the department's 23 sub-agencies.

The big picture: About 10% of employees left DHS last year, according to a review by Federal News Network.

- Roughly 80% of career leadership at ICE has been fired or demoted under Noem's tenure, according to a Wall Street Journal investigation. The agency is under immense pressure to reach arrest and deportation goals.
- This includes the early demotion of the first acting agency director Caleb Vitello last February.
- Noem tried to replace Vitello with her political ally Madison Sheehan, who became deputy director before departing to run for Congress.

At Customs and Border Protection, the agency that oversees Border Patrol, enforcement at ports of entry as well as tariff revenue collection, Noem reportedly tried to force out Commissioner Rodney Scott.

- Two people told the Washington Examiner that Noem and Lewandowski went to extreme lengths to pressure Scott to quit. He is Senate-confirmed and can only be fired by the president.
- Scott's leadership team was fired by DHS headquarters, kicking out a century of combined experience, according to the Examiner.

- Both HR chiefs at ICE and CBP have also left the agencies in the middle of a historic hiring effort that aims to bring on thousands of new agents in record time.

Zoom in: Noem and Lewandowski have targeted employees for allegedly talking to the press.

- Noem posted on Feb. 4 that she planned to refer a former staffer for criminal charges over alleged leaks.

- Lewandowski threatened felony charges for an alleged leaker in a X post on Feb. 10.

- Employees were ordered to take polygraph tests to find disloyal staffers, the Journal reported in May.

Zoom out: Noem and Lewanowski fired her first FEMA chief in May after tension over how to dismantle the agency. A second acting chief abruptly stepped down in November.

- The two also repeatedly clashed with White House border czar Tom Homan, who was an acting ICE director in Trump's first term. Homan took over the ICE operation in Minneapolis at the president's request.

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- The Cyber and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has also bled senior leadership, including executive director Bridget Bean

last year. It's been about a year since CISA has had a Senate-confirmed leader.

The other side: "Secretary Noem saved U.S. taxpayers $1.3 billion ... without cuts to key law enforcement, border security, national security, immigration enforcement and positions with a public safety responsibility," a DHS spokesperson said in an emailed statement.

- The DHS spokesperson also said that the media is creating a "non-existent wedge" between CBP and DHS.
- The spokesperson claimed nine of Noem's 10 senior staff are still at DHS, but would not name them.
- An additional statement from acting ICE Director Todd Lyons said "ICE and DHS have never had a closer working relationship" and thanked Lewandowski for his help.

The bottom line: There are now about 800 fewer employees at DHS HQ, 1,600 fewer at FEMA, 1,000 fewer at CISA and 2,000 fewer at TSA and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, according to the Office of Personnel Management.

- ICE, CBP and the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, which trains new hires, have added head count.

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